

## “Peace at the Last”

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. *If I should die before I wake...* And there it is, the leading cause of pediatric insomnia – *If I should die before I wake...* as some have jokingly claimed, anyway. Doesn't really seem like it should be the topic of a joke, though. In fact, I once sat at the bedside of a twelve year old young lady, who wouldn't live to see 14. She confided how difficult it was for her to pray those very words.

But perhaps personal experience has taught your average Joe something – I've prayed that same line of that same prayer more than 10,000 times, and I have yet to actually *die* before I *wake*. When truth is based on perception and experience, you can begin to understand the joking skepticism.

Certainly for the believer those words make a lot of sense - *If I should die before I wake...* We know how fragile life can be. We know that the Savior of nations will return like a **thief in the night**. We know that **in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye** all will be **changed**. Even then, we sometimes fail to appreciate the full meaning of the words and the full ramification of the situation: *If I should die before I wake...*

But what if you knew for sure? What if there was no doubt, that when you closed your eyes tonight, you wouldn't wake up; that the next time you closed your eyes it would not be in sleep but in death? Would it change the way you prayed that prayer? **When I die before I wake...?**

There was a man once in just such a situation – a man who knew that his life was about to be over. As he prayed, it was not so much the peaceful petitioning of a child drifting off to sleep, but the impassioned plea of one who was facing the end of his life and was about to meet his maker face to face.

It would be impossible for any of us sinners to stand in the perfect presence of the almighty God. But this man particularly had a past of which he was not proud. His childhood, one would imagine, was like that of any other kid. History would indicate that

religion for him was more about formality than anything else – the formality of church attendance, basic religious training, following the commandments and the traditions of the church. That's just what you did.

But as the boy grew up into a young man there was a growing resentment for government and, well, *anyone* in authority, scrapes with the law, and finally he found himself on trial for a crime that he *did* commit. The verdict - guilty. The sentence – death – death by execution.

And now here he was, facing the end of his life, caught between emotions: his mind desperately trying to justify his actions, lashing out at anyone around him, painting himself out to be the victim, yet bearing the harsh reality, the crushing weight, of his own guilt, for his own crimes.

They say that there are no atheists in foxholes and I would wager that there aren't too many on death row either. Faced with death, taking in the reality that he would close his eyes in death before the day was done, longing for *peace at the last*, he offered up his impassioned plea. No, it wasn't “*When I die before I wake...*” Though it might as well have been. No, he pleaded, “**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**”

Yes, it was the thief on the cross, the *malefactor*, the evil doer, longing for *peace at the last*, in words that we sang just moments ago...and rightly so. For that man was you and me. **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** I know, so often we are shocked at the violent world around us, the horrific crimes that cause us to shake our heads maybe even gasp at the ugliness of sin. But do not let your self-righteousness deceive you. You are that man, we are the malefactors, the evil doers.

Even from conception we are sinful. We recall with shame the sins of our youth. We recognize our apathy toward worship and the empty praises we offer from weary hearts. And the guilt of all-out rebellion against God and his will in our lives...it's crushing. Try as we may to justify our actions. Try as we may to imitate our first parents – Adam and Eve - and paint

ourselves as victims. God's Word comes to us and convicts us. Held up to his holy law, we are guilty as charged. And the reality sinks in that ***The wages of sin is death.*** We are as good as hanging on that cross for our sins.

***If I should die before I wake...*** Yes, I should die, I will die because of my sins. Be it the crushing impact of another vehicle, a rare virus, a sacrificial act for the protection of others, the suffocation of the heart, the bursting of a blood vessel, or the completely inexplicable - short of the Last Day's trumpet blast - death is just around the corner. And you and I will stand before our holy and righteous God, knowing that we are malefactors, evil doers, guilty as charged, condemned to eternal death. ***If I should die before I wake...Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.***

And Jesus says, ***I tell you the truth, ... you will be with me in paradise.*** And there it is – peace at the last. It is difficult to imagine the impact those words had on the thief hanging next to Jesus. But you know the impact those words have on you. Words uttered by our Lord even as his own life was ebbing away for you and me – to remove the shame of our past, to lift the crush of guilt, to wash us clean in his own blood and present us as a fragrant and pleasing offering to God - to give us life, he took on death. With nails already driven through his body, lungs screaming for oxygen, and a spirit crying out from the abyss that is separation from the Father, he speaks to you and to me words of peace - ***I tell you the truth, ... you will be with me in paradise.***

In a few moments you will silently depart, perhaps for the evening, perhaps returning for the 7:00 service. You will return to your homes, to your lives, and eventually, to your beds. As a direct result of God's grace, we have been blessed to sit at the foot of the cross, listen to our Savior's words of love, and find comfort for our souls.

But as you leave this sanctuary you will be confronted, confronted by the terrors of the night – terrors from within and terrors from without – terrors that swirl in the dark

recesses of your mind – that satanic predator circling you, seeking your overthrow, inundating you with his venomous words. And you may feel very alone in your battle against guilt and fear.

But do not let your hearts be troubled. Know that strength and safety, forgiveness and love – know that ***the gift of God: eternal life*** in Christ - know that ***peace*** is yours. For your Savior has searched your heart and knows your fear and your guilt. Wherever you are at your Savior will guide you and hold you fast. He promises that this world will not be the end, but that he has prepared a place for you and me, and ***will*** come again so that we can be with him in ***eternal*** peace. Peace between you and God – peace purchased by his innocent sacrifice, peace guaranteed with his resurrection, peace that comes to us through word and sacrament, peace today, peace tomorrow, and peace at the last. ***If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus' sake.***

From...

***Luke 23:39-43 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"<sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"<sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."<sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."<sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."***